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## The Process of Self-Authorship for New Student Affairs Professionals

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### Abstract

*Using narrative inquiry, this study explored the process of self-authorship for five new student affairs professionals during their first two years as student affairs professionals. Past research on new professionals focused mainly on what new professionals need to know rather than how they make meaning. The findings suggest that the process of development included realizing that those with a shared identity do not always experience the world similarly, creating their environment upon realizing that it was not going to simply meet their needs, and beginning to question their own thoughts. These findings highlight the need to continue providing intentional developmental opportunities for new professionals.*

*Keywords:* self-authorship, student affairs, graduate preparation programs, new professionals



On March 4, 2013, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* printed an article expressing that employers are underwhelmed with the quality of skills and abilities amongst recent college graduates (Fischer, 2013). “Employers say that recent graduates often don’t know how to communicate effectively, and struggle with adapting, problem-solving, and making decisions” (Fischer, 2013, para. 2). This article exemplifies current questions regarding the quality of college graduates. In 1937 the American Council on Education published that a purpose of student affairs was to contribute to the holistic development of students so as to successfully prepare college graduates. To assist in students’ holistic development, and thus help prepare graduates, it is important to consider if student affairs professionals are “willing to support people’s moves to places [in regard to their development] we ourselves have already been?” (Kegan, 1994, p. 292-293), which raises the question as to if we ourselves have already been to those places?

Both Kegan (1994) and Baxter Magolda (2001) argued that self-authorship is necessary for successful life functioning, and Fischer (2013) illustrated the need in college graduates. Self-authorship is a way of making meaning in which individuals possess the ability to face economic complexity, balance multiple roles, interact effectively with a diverse world, and responsibly confront social issues (Baxter Magolda, 2001). The necessity for student affairs professionals to be self-authored is evident when exploring the demands of the field; demands including accountability (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Keeling, 2004); navigating through ever-increasing amount of information due to technological advancements (Keeling, 2004; Willinsky, Fischman, & Metcalfe, 2011); and an increasingly diverse student body (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). These pressures become increasingly more complex as new professionals move throughout their career and higher education evolves. Each step requires student affairs professionals to understand from multiple perspectives, use an internal compass to make responsible decisions using resources and data, and consider what is best for each context and those within it. In short, these demands require student affairs professionals be self-authored. Given that entry-level positions in student affairs often have significant direct student contact, it is worthwhile to begin exploring the process of self-authorship for student affairs professionals by starting with new professionals, which was the purpose of this narrative study.



## Literature Review

### Self-authorship

Self-authorship is a way of making meaning found within Kegan's (1994) lifespan development theory, comprised of five orders of consciousness that stretch across a continuum from simple to complex, and provide a framework for how an individual makes meaning. Within Kegan's theory, evolution of consciousness occurs when an individual experiences dissonance in their current way of making meaning. Specifically, Kegan's (1994) fourth order of consciousness is necessary for the achievement of self-authorship. In the fourth order of consciousness, individuals can arbitrate: (a) between themselves and others; (b) one set of ideas, values, beliefs and another; and (c) parts of each (Kegan, 1994).

Baxter Magolda's (2001) research advanced Kegan's (1994) work by articulating two distinct phases for achieving self-authorship. During the first phase, becoming the author of one's own life, individuals "shifted from 'how you know' to 'how I know'" (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 119) and begin the process of choosing their own beliefs. This period is marked by intense self-reflection and interaction with others, which leads to the establishment of an internal foundation for making meaning, Baxter Magolda's second part for achieving self-authorship. The internal foundation serves as a framework for answering the questions of what to believe, who to be, and how to relate to others. An internal foundation affords individuals the opportunity from which to engage in authentic, mutual relationships with others, as well as the realization that they cannot control the external world (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

The two parts for achieving self-authorship that Baxter Magolda (2001) identified seemed to occur for participants primarily during the decade of their twenties. Yet, Garvey Berger (2012) cites that only 41% of all adults were self-authored, and Kegan (1994) stated that, "at any given moment, around one-half to two-thirds of the adult population appears to not have reached the fourth order of consciousness" (p. 188). Thus, it seems important to consider if new student affairs professionals are still developing toward self-authorship.

### Student Affairs Preparation Program Experience

For individuals interested in student affairs as a profession, attending graduate school is encouraged and serves as a starting point for exploring the process of self-authorship in new professionals. Most of the research on graduate education that is specific to preparation



programs examines what curricula prepared graduates for entry-level professional work (Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009). For example, Gayles and Kelly (2007) explored the outcomes of diversity in the curriculum. Slightly different, although connected to outcomes, Young and Janosik (2007) explored the perceptions of recent graduates to the identified learning outcomes set by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education for Professional Preparation programs (CAS, 2012). CAS sets forth standards and guidelines for student affairs preparation programs. The assumption is that if graduate programs are structured to meet the CAS standards, graduates of such programs will have achieved a certain level of learning and development. Yet, Young and Janosik's (2007) research concluded that more research is needed to fully understand the effect of the CAS standards on graduates from preparation programs. Even if such research is conducted, the complexity with which students meet any of the standards, however, is still less explored. Jones (2007) articulated that within the student affairs profession, "we are overly focused on outcomes and not process" (p. 4). By focusing so much on outcomes the content of what is needed to become a student affairs professional can quickly become a checklist and attention may not be paid to how individuals are making meaning of the outcomes (Jones, 2007).

### **Student Affairs New Professional Experiences**

Unlike the research of preparation programs focusing on what graduate students need to know, the research on the new professional experience is broader. For example, various areas of focus include the high attrition rate of new professionals (Tull, 2006), the supervisor/supervisee relationship (Saunders & Cooper, 2003), and professional development (Cliente et al., 2006). One study explored a bit beyond these areas. Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) explored what new professionals think are areas that preparation programs should prepare students for when it comes to the content and process of transitioning into being a full-time professional. An area of further research identified was to "consider graduate students' personal epistemologies and development in the design and implementation of master's curricula in student affairs and higher education" (p. 330), which this study begins to explore.

*Keywords:* self-authorship, student affairs, graduate preparation programs, new professionals, higher education



### **Methodology**

The design of this study was narrative inquiry (Chase, 2005). This method fit the study because it allowed for an in-depth narrative exploration of the lived experience of participants' first three years as new student affairs professionals.

### **Sampling and Participants**

There are no rules for sample size with narrative inquiry; in fact sample sizes are usually small and often unrepresentative in order to focus on gathering meaningful information (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Data collection was first completed within eight months after the participants graduated from a student affairs preparation program, and again after two full years of practice. Thus, the interviews encompassed the participants first three years of practice. The particular reflective responsive interview format was based on the Wabash National Study on Liberal Arts Education Interview (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007).

Five participants contributed to this study: Micah, David, Brandon, Anne, and Ashley (pseudonyms), and all attended a public, comprehensive institution in the Midwest. Purposeful selection was used to recruit and select them using a set of criteria (Maxwell, 2005). The criteria included participants: a) attending the same CAS compliant preparation program; b) being from the same cohort; c) having at least one unique experience (e.g., a different mentor); d) having differing undergraduate majors; and e) variation in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and social class. Each participant completed six reflective response interviews for a total of 30 interviews, and each lasting approximately one hour. All 30 of the interviews were conducted by the same interviewer, and after being fully transcribed were sent back to each participant for member checking.

All five participants worked in a variety of positions as new professionals after graduate school. Micah worked in student activities, Anne worked in advising; and Brandon, David, and Ashley all worked in residential life. None of the participants stayed at the institution from which they received their degree. One participant worked at a public, research one institution, two participants worked at public, comprehensive institutions, and two participants worked at private, liberal arts institutions. Two of the participants left their original institution before completing three full years as a new professional, while three of the participants continued to work at the same institution at the three year mark. Although, two out of those three had

different titles after being given more responsibilities due to consolidation of resources for budgetary reasons. Two of the participants identified as women and three identified as men. One participant identified as Black, while the other four identified as White.

### **Data Analysis**

The holistic-content analysis approach, which allows for analysis of the complete content of the story, was used to analyze the narrative data (Leiblich et al., 1998). A three-person research team was comprised for data analysis. The team members had a variety of practitioner experience in both functional areas, as well as time spent in the field practicing. The members of the team individually read each of the participants' transcribed interviews several times, listening for the whole of each participant's story. Next, each team member read through the participants' interviews focusing on how each participant made meaning of their experiences throughout their entire story. Following this step, each team member explored the stories for supporting evidence as to how they heard the participants meaning making, as well as looking for areas of incongruence or unfinished thoughts. Each team member again reviewed all of the interviews before looking across the stories for connections, in order to understand the abstract phenomena underlying all of the stories. Between each step of analysis the team members came together to compare findings, which often resulted in extensive discussions. Field notes were written before, during, and immediately following each interview, as well as through the analysis process.

### **Limitations**

It is unknown what would have been discovered if additional participants had been included. Additionally, the participants were all from the same preparation program. It might have added greater depth to the study to include participants from other preparation programs, which is an area for future research.

### **Narrative Themes**

Four themes emerged from the five participants' stories:

- 1) depending on the external environment as a method to make sense of experiences
- 2) feeling similar to others that share an identity, and being surprised to find difference
- 3) realizing that they can partake in creating their environment
- 4) raising questions stemming from uncomfortable situations



The vignettes presented below illustrate each theme, exemplifying the process of how the participants made meaning of their experiences. The first two themes reflect processes used by the participants during both their graduate preparation program, as well as in their new professional roles. The third and fourth themes emerged primarily for the participants in the new professional environment.

### **External Environment**

The external environment was what David, Ashley, Brandon, and Anne relied on to make meaning at numerous points throughout their stories. For this theme, the external environment was defined as a relationship or structure that connected to a participant but existed outside of the participants' physical being. Specifically, for these participants, the external environment was used to help make decisions such as what opportunities to explore and what they should be doing. David struggled deciding between various opportunities and often asked his mentor to narrow his choices, claiming that "I would talk to him about 10 different things and he might remove three or four of the 10 things and recommend I do two or three of them over the others, so he was definitely present." Unlike David, Ashley used the clear structure her assistantship site offered her when it came to how to behave as a professional.

I think in general I am very big on boundaries. . . . As much as I felt restrictive, I like that it made it obvious. It was here is the line. Don't step across it and I was like done, got it.

Ashley continued to seek structures to follow as she began her first job. She took a position within residence life, and felt that there were certain responsibilities she had to live up to; "I thought the best way to get to know the students was that I had to be at every possible program." Regardless of how each of the participants used relationships or structures, these examples illustrate how the participants relied on their external environment to guide them in making sense of their experiences.

### **Same Identity**

Anne, David, Micah, and Brandon sought to make sense of their experiences with others through their various identities. These participants expected that people holding the same identities made sense of them in the same way. This was seen in Anne's belief that the students at the institution in which she accepted her new professional position, which she selected



because it was an institution similar to her undergraduate institution, would behave in ways she herself behaved as an undergraduate student. Similarly, Micah thought the graduate students he worked with in his assistantship would respect the hierarchical structure of the office in the same way that he did. This way of thinking continued for Micah as a new professional by anticipating that the professionals he worked with would share his same viewpoint, however he found that “a lot of the way decisions that were made were because of who was involved and not always because of sound reasoning . . . so that was kind of frustrating to be in that position.” In the same way, Brandon expected a faculty member who shared his same racial identity to define race the same way, but “we actually didn’t click as much as I thought we would. I think [their] philosophy of being African-American and mine were very different and so I think that was the key. That was very shocking to me.” As a new professional, he thought that his new professional colleagues were having similar experiences and it was not until a professional conference that he understood his colleagues were having quite different experiences.

These examples illustrate well how the participants expected that those with similar identities would share similar experiences. In each occurrence, the participants expressed that they often felt surprised when those they thought were the same due to common identities described having a different experience. Their surprise helped them consider how they made sense of their own identities more deeply.

### **Participate in Creating Their Environment**

As new professionals, all of the participants at first expected their environment to simply meet their needs. Thus, they did not speak up to share their thoughts, ask questions, or articulate their concerns. Over time each participant began realizing that they could help create their environment, using the aforementioned processes, so that their needs would be met.

More specifically, early on most of the participants went with what they thought was expected of them in their new professional position. This led to the participants telling stories such as not enjoying their work environment, or being frustrated in their relationships with others. Eventually these participants’ began talking about how they are a part of their relationships, including the relationship they had with their environment, meaning that their environment would not meet their needs unless they participated in shaping it. This realization led the participants to reach a place where they recognized that they needed to speak up.





As a new professional, Ashley chose to speak up when she realized her supervisor was not providing her with the supervision she sought, explaining

I'm being more open with what I need from supervision, so I think part of that was in the beginning not feeling comfortable speaking up for what I needed and what would benefit me from a supervisory kind of relationship.

After attending a national conference in which Brandon realized his new professional experiences were different than his peers, he began to recognize that he did not speak up when he disagreed with his colleagues. He eventually reached a point where the decisions and situations became more frequent and he realized that in order to make change, he had to speak up, explaining that "the way you perceive things is very different and you know no one can read minds. . . . I was expecting the college to read my mind." Anne's participation in the creation of the environment was a bit different than Brandon's or Ashley's. As a new professional, Anne began realizing that the advising that made her feel good was not always the advising students needed when making career-related decisions. So, Anne began shaping the environment of her advising sessions;

One of the changes that I really tried to make within the last year is really trying to ask more of those developmental questions. You know, even if I have met with you three or four times I am going to ask you why you still want to be a (name of career).

Each of the participants appeared to no longer be assuming that their environment would simply meet their expectations, as demonstrated in the above examples, and were beginning to shape their environment so it would meet their needs.

### **Raising Questions**

As new professionals, all of the participants dealt with situations that made them feel uncomfortable. These situations ranged from institutional policy changes to realizing that work was their life's primary activity. After becoming uncomfortable all of the participants began to question and consider what the situation meant to them, as well as why they thought they were having such experiences.

For example, as the institution's administration made more decisions that Micah did not agree with, he began questioning if he could continue on in his position, and started looking for another job. At the same time, Micah began to question others telling him that everything would



work out when he was unsure that it would. During this time, Micah began questioning himself, as well as the meaning he made of his past experiences, asking “Was I unduly propped up through my graduate school experience and so I came out with a false sense of where I was as a professional or what I could have been as a professional?” Feeling burnt out, Ashley began questioning the kind of professional she wanted to be by exploring various professional opportunities around her. She volunteered to advise several at-risk students and advise a university-level committee. She also began to ask others how they approach their jobs

Just out of curiosity and trying to make myself better able to see if there is someone out there that has a way that can make my job easier and the students job more enjoyable, but also it can be interesting to just know how other people do their jobs.

As Ashley explored how others approached their practice, she recognized that she did not see the whole of their practice, noting that “I’ve gotten a lot more open to that idea in a positive way that just because I don’t see someone working doesn’t mean that they are not.” Similarly, Brandon began to consider how he had allowed himself to be consumed by his first position:

I listen to what I’m doing. I think I used to ignore it and I used to think it was very selfish to really pay attention to myself, to really take a moment to say this is what you are feeling.

David was uncomfortable when he realized that a group of Hawaiian students often treated him differently as an authority figure, “I walked by and they were silent and watched as I walked past . . . it is something I’ve noticed and attempted to understand.” David sought out a colleague to discuss the experience because he realized he needed to learn more about how he had contributed to the experience. Similar to David, Anne sought out assistance from another to help her process her realization that her work experiences were connected to her. “If I am trying to work with students to help them define and figure out these things for themselves, how am I doing that in my own life?” Although each participant’s questioning was leading them down a unique path, they each began to spend time considering who they are and what that means for their experiences.

### Discussion

The findings suggest that the process toward self-authorship for new professionals is anything but stagnant. Discussing experiences throughout their preparation programs and as new



professionals illustrated evolution in the process of how the participants made meaning, yet not quite development of a self-authored mind. Continued evolution in meaning making does not receive much focus in the discussion about successfully preparing new professionals. As the participants transitioned from graduate school into new professional roles, relying on the external environment for what they should do and think caused frustration and discomfort, which led to reflection, and the raising of questions about who they are and how that contributed to how they understood their experiences. Thus, there appears to be a connection to Baxter Magolda's (2001) two phases of development toward self-authorship. This movement was reflected in the participants' narratives when they expressed how they were beginning to participate in the shaping of their environment, as well as raising questions about what their experiences meant for and about them.

For several of the participants, the process of moving away from dependence upon their external environment for making meaning involved experiences where participants came to realize that not all others with a similar identity or experiences had the same thoughts as them. Many of the key moments shared involved the participants working with others with similar identities or experience, yet coming to different outcomes. These experiences seemed to puzzle the participants and hung with them as they came to realize that perhaps even with a shared identity, differences exist. Thus, the participants began recognizing the ethnocentrism from which they understood others, which is necessary for achieving self-authorship.

### **Implications for Practice**

Given the pressures facing higher education, and the responsibilities of those within student affairs, it seems ideal that a self-authored mindset is desired prior to attaining a new professional position. Yet, this study did not find new professionals achieving a self-authored mind. Thus, several approaches can be taken to promote advancement toward self-authorship for new professionals.

First, during the job search process, employers could provide new professionals insight into experiences where not everyone agrees, and how daily situations are processed, thereby sending candidates' messages that the institution expects their participation in fulfilling their job responsibilities. Additionally, asking candidates for specific examples of how they come to the



decisions they make in their practice sends messages to new professionals that discomfort is expected, and is a process they will need to consider for themselves.

Second, it is worthwhile for prospective new professionals to spend time from the beginning to the end of the job search process reflecting on how they are coming to the decisions they are making. Ideally, encouragement to do so would come from preparation program faculty during any sort of a capstone course or job search workshop. Alternatively, professional associations hosting job fairs could incorporate this into their orientation process. Finally, candidates themselves can self-initiate such reflection. For example, they can ask questions regarding how the institution wants an employee to fulfill the job responsibilities, and for explanations of how recent changes were made within the department. Such examples can provide candidates insight into how they can participate in shaping the environment at that institution.

Finally, the participants' narratives serve as a reminder that development is holistic, ongoing, and continues through their graduate programs and into their professional practice. Preparation program faculty, as well as potential employers, could benefit from exploring their expectations for new professionals. This does not mean altering the expectations. Rather, exploring the expectations new professionals face could reveal how they are: confirming that new professionals should depend on the external environment during the job search process, as well as their orientation into the institution as new professionals; sending messages that not everyone thinks the same way even if there are shared identities; encouraging new professionals to recognize that they are being hired to contribute to the creation of the institutional environment, and that it is important that questions are asked of themselves when experiencing uncomfortable situations.

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